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(71) Applicant: FIDELICA MICROSYSTEMS, INC.
[US/US]; 48860 Green Valley Road, Fremont, CA 94539 (US).

(72) Inventor: GANAPATHI, Srinivasan; 48860 Green Valley Road, Fremont, CA 94539 (US).

(74) Agents: JOYNER, Roger, S. et al.; Pillsbury Madison & Sutro LLP, 1100 New York Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20005 (US).

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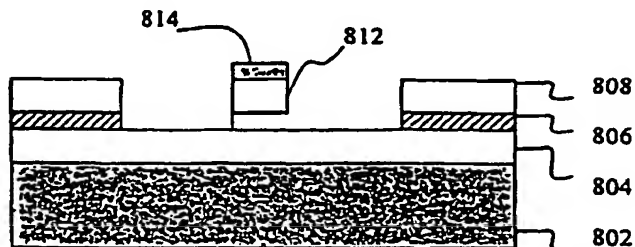
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(57) Abstract: An alternate method of designing and manufacturing a semiconductor pressure sensor inherently allows for significantly improved sensitivity, thereby allowing miniaturization of the sensor. As a result, the design lends itself to arranging the pressure sensors using this method in a two dimensional array, and measuring pressure distributions with very high lateral resolution. Furthermore, the design eliminates some of the processing complexities associated with the designs taught in the prior art, specifically those related to processes for manufacturing the plates of the parallel plate capacitor, or the

piezoresistive strain elements. The invention allows the manufacture of a two dimensional array of pressure sensors with very fine lateral resolution, which provides a much improved means over the prior art of recording fingerprints and the like. Used in conjunction with processing electronics and software that are well known, this method can be used as a means of personal verification, identification and detection. An additional significant benefit of this invention is that the MR device can be used as a temperature sensor or as a magnetic field sensor in this configuration.

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MAGNETORESISTIVE SEMICONDUCTOR PRESSURE SENSORS AND FINGERPRINT IDENTIFICATION / VERIFICATION SENSORS USING SAME

RELATED APPLICATIONS

5 This application is related to and claims priority from U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/144,843 filed on July 20, 1999.

Background of the Invention

1. Field of the Invention

10 This invention relates generally to the use of microelectromechanical or micromachined devices manufactured by semiconductor processing techniques for the measurement of stress or pressure, and more particularly to the use of magnetoresistive sensors in conjunction with microelectromechanical devices for use as stress/pressure sensors, temperature sensors and magnetic field sensors, including an improved fingerprint sensing device.

2. Description of the Related Art

15 There are two well known and published types of semiconductor based sensors for pressure sensing. The first is a pressure sensor as described in U.S. Patent Nos. 5,316,619 and 5,888,845, which describe the use of a capacitor for measuring pressures within sealed chambers. As shown in Fig. 1, the sealed chamber 104 of capacitive sensor 100 has a top defined by a very thin diaphragm 106 of known and fixed length and thickness (length typically in the range of 200 microns and
20 thickness typically in the range of 3-4 microns); a bottom wall (not shown) that is at a fixed predetermined distance from the diaphragm (typically 0.2 micron away), which is essentially composed of the silicon substrate 102, and side walls 108 that support the top membrane. The diaphragm and the bottom of the chamber form the two plates of a parallel plate capacitor. Upon the application of pressure to the diaphragm, it deflects towards the bottom of the chamber, and the reduced spacing
25 between the diaphragm and the bottom of the sealed chamber results in a change in capacitance.

U.S. Patent No. 5,316,619 teaches some design rules for the dimensions of the diaphragm in order to achieve a certain minimum nominal capacitance, and also to obtain a minimum sensitivity, so as to make the capacitive sensor viable for use as a product. Using these design rules, the required dimensions of the diaphragm are of the order of 500 microns in length and 4 microns in thickness.
30 U.S. Patent No. 5,888,845 uses similar design concepts and capacitive measurement techniques, but teaches an improved manufacturing process to obtain diaphragms that are substantially thinner, on the order of 0.02 – 1 micron thick, thereby considerably improving the sensitivity of the sensor.

One of the drawbacks of the above teachings is that the design rules requiring relatively large chamber dimensions are a direct consequence of the low sensitivity of the device to applied pressure.
35 As a result, when the pressure sensors are arranged in a two dimensional array to measure pressure

distributions individually at various points, the lateral two dimensional resolution is on the order of 800 microns to 1 mm. This makes the devices unusable if high resolution is required. Reduction of these dimensions to miniaturize the structure will result in reduced sensitivity, fracture of the membrane in response to high pressures, and a starting low nominal capacitance value which increases the noise in the measured signal and therefore makes the measurement less reliable.

A second type of semiconductor based pressure sensors uses the same type of sealed chamber described above, but detects deflection changes using piezoresistive strain elements. The sealed chamber is made on a silicon wafer using similar methods to those described above. The membrane is made with a thickness in the range of 0.1 – 1 micron, and with a length in the range of 50 micron. Piezoresistive strain gauges are made of p-type silicon that are formed on the membrane. The deflection of the membrane under applied pressure causes changes in the resistances of the strain elements, which can be used to determine pressure.

However, there are several disadvantages with this approach. First, the sensitivity of this device is very low, with a gauge factor, defined by the term $(\Delta R/R)/\epsilon$ (where $\Delta R/R$ is the relative change in resistance, and ϵ is the strain in the material) of about 120. Second, the thickness of the diaphragm, at 0.1 – 0.3 micron, is so small that excess pressures will tend to fracture the beam. Third, since silicon is the only piezoresistive material whose properties are well known, characterized, and lends itself to manufacturing, any pressure sensor based on piezoresistance is restricted to the use of silicon substrates. Finally, when the sensors are made in a two dimensional array to measure pressure distributions, the resolution is on the order of 200 microns.

Other patents related to the art of providing semiconductor pressure sensors, but having similar drawbacks to those identified above, include U.S. Patent Nos. 4,771,638, 4,498,229, 5,427,975, 4,771,639, 5,736,430, 4,809,552, 5,471,723 and 4,744,863.

Use of pressure to image fingerprints

The fingerprint sensing industry uses several different technologies to image fingerprints. The two most prominent technologies are optical based sensors and capacitance based sensors. Optical sensors use a light source, lenses and a prism to image the "ridges" and valleys on a fingerprint, based on differences in the reflected light from the features. The capacitance sensor uses semiconductor type processing to fabricate a two-dimensional array of capacitors. The individual sensors form one plate of the parallel plate capacitor, while the finger itself, when placed on the array, acts as the second plate. Upon contact with the array of sensors, the individual distance from each sensor to the skin is measured using capacitive techniques. The difference in distance to skin at the ridges and valleys of a fingerprint provide the means to replicate the fingerprint.

Both the above techniques fundamentally measure the spacing between the fingerprint features, and the sensor. The difference in spacing provides the means to differentiate between the high points (valleys) and the low points (ridges). The measurement of spacing is inherently subject to several drawbacks: since the height difference between the ridges and valleys is only of the order of 50
5 microns, any parameter which affects the spacing between the finger and the sensor will affect the measurement. For example, both types of sensors are very sensitive to the thickness of the protective coating. They are also sensitive to oils or grease on the finger, and the presence or absence of moisture on the finger. In addition, most of these sensors are affected by the ambient temperature at the time of sensing. Under very hot or very cold conditions, capacitive sensor can provide erroneous
10 readings.

As a result of the above drawbacks to spacing based reproduction of fingerprints, it would be very useful to be able to use the difference in pressure exerted by the ridges and valleys of a fingerprint on a sensor to replicate the fingerprint image. In principle, a pressure based fingerprint sensor would be impervious to the drawbacks listed above, such as wet or dry conditions on the
15 fingertip, presence of oil or grease on the fingertip, thickness of protective coatings, etc. However, due to the very low sensitivity and inability of the prior art to provide the required resolution, pressure based sensors have not been deployed for the replication of fingerprints.

Accordingly, there remains a need in the art for a microelectromechanical device suitable for use as a stress and/or pressure sensor that has high sensitivity yet can provide high lateral resolution.
20 Moreover, there further remains a need for a sensor that is suitable for use in fingerprint identification and verification that is less sensitive to adverse conditions such as extreme temperatures and skin oils and grease.

Summary of the Invention

25 Accordingly, an object of the present invention is to provide a microelectromechanical device that overcomes the problems of the prior art.

Another object of the invention is to provide a microelectromechanical device that is suitable for use as a stress and/or pressure sensor.

30 Another object of the invention is to provide a microelectromechanical device that is suitable for use as a stress and/or pressure sensor and has high sensitivity.

Another object of the invention is to provide a microelectromechanical device that is suitable for use as a stress and/or pressure sensor and can provide high lateral resolution, while simultaneously maintaining mechanical robustness.

35 Another object of the invention is to eliminate some of the processing complexities associated with the designs taught in the prior art, specifically those related to processes for manufacturing the

plates of the parallel plate capacitor, or the piezoresistive strain elements.

Another object of the invention is to provide a microelectromechanical device that is suitable for use in fingerprint identification and verification.

5 Another object of the invention is to provide a microelectromechanical device that is suitable for use in fingerprint identification and verification and that is less sensitive to adverse conditions such as extreme temperatures and skin oils and grease.

Another object of the invention is to provide a microelectromechanical device that is suitable for use in fingerprint identification and verification and that is less sensitive to transient ESD voltages, and also mechanical abrasion.

10 To achieve these objects and others, the invention provides an alternate method of designing and manufacturing a pressure sensor that inherently allows for miniaturization of the sensor, while simultaneously providing better sensitivity. As a result, the design lends itself to arranging the pressure sensors using this method in a two dimensional array, and measuring pressure distributions with very high lateral resolution.

15 Furthermore, the design eliminates some of the processing complexities associated with the designs taught in the prior art, specifically those related to processes for manufacturing the plates of the parallel plate capacitor, or the piezoresistive strain elements.

Finally, as a product example, the use of the invention to manufacture a two dimensional array of pressure sensors with very fine lateral resolution provides a much improved means over the prior art of recording fingerprints.

20 Used in conjunction with processing electronics and software that are well known and described elsewhere, this method can be used as a means of personal verification, identification and detection. Such a device when used as a fingerprint sensor is not subject to some of the problems associated with the prior art for fingerprint sensing as described above. An additional significant benefit of this invention is that the MR device can be used as a temperature sensor or a magnetic field sensor in this configuration.

Brief Description of the Drawings

30 These and other objects and advantages of the present invention, along with the best mode for practicing it, will become apparent to those skilled in the art after considering the following detailed specification, together with the accompanying drawings wherein:

FIG. 1 illustrates a conventional semiconductor pressure sensor;

FIG. 2 is a graph illustrating magnetoresistive characteristics as a function of relative angle between magnetization and current;

35 FIG. 3 illustrates a magnetoresistive stack in accordance with the invention;

FIG. 4 is a graph illustrating the effects of magnetostriction on magnetoresistive characteristics as a function of relative angle between magnetization and current;

FIG. 5 illustrates a beam or diaphragm substrate on which a magnetoresistive sensor is deposited and patterned in accordance with the invention.

5 FIG. 6 illustrates a two-dimensional array of beams or diaphragms employing magnetoresistive devices such as those illustrated in FIG. 3 for use as pressure sensors in accordance with the invention.

FIG. 7 illustrates an example of circuitry for performing electronic measurement in a two-dimensional array of pressure sensors employing magnetoresistive sensors such as that illustrated in
10 FIG. 3 in accordance with the invention.

FIGS. 8A-8E illustrate a method for fabricating a beam or diaphragm which would employ a magnetoresistive device such as that illustrated in FIG. 3 for the purpose of pressure sensing in accordance with the invention.

15 Detailed Description of the Invention

This invention uses a magnetoresistive element, to realize a pressure sensor with very high sensitivity while maintaining miniaturized dimensions. Magnetoresistive materials and devices have been described in great detail elsewhere (see, e.g. C.D. Mee and E.D. Daniel, "Magnetic Recording, Vol. 1: Technology," McGraw-Hill, New York, 1987, pp. 244-336), and are extensively used in the
20 field of magnetic recording, where the sensor is used to sense small changes in the magnetic field. The present invention exploits the properties of such materials in novel ways for uses in pressure sensors as taught below.

Magnetoresistance is a property of a material that causes the resistance of a material to change upon the application of an external magnetic field. Typically, this characteristic is defined by a
25 parameter called $(\Delta R/R)$; the percentage resistance change over the initial resistance without the presence of an external field. This property is exhibited by many Nickel-based alloys such as Nickel-Iron, Nickel-Cobalt, Nickel-Iron-Cobalt, etc. Fundamentally, this property is related to the fact that if there is a current flow in one direction, the resistance to the flow of current is dependent on the angle between the direction of current flow and the direction of the magnetization of the material. The
30 relationship between the resistance and the angle between the current flow and the magnetization is described by the equation below.

$$R=R_0-\Delta R\sin^2\theta \quad (\text{Equation 1})$$

where R_0 is the (maximum) resistance when the current and the magnetization are parallel to one another, ΔR is the maximum change in resistance of the material between $\theta=0^\circ$ and $\theta=90^\circ$.

This equation is graphically plotted in Fig. 2, and is commonly referred to as a transfer curve. Typically, the magnitude of $\Delta R/R$ is in the range of a few percent and depends on the choice and thickness of alloy, the presence of epitaxial underlayers, etc.

In magnetic recording applications, where magnetoresistive devices are used to sense magnetic fields, the sensors are operated at the midpoint of the curve on Fig. 2, marked by point A. This is because point A (where the magnetization is at an angle of 45° to the direction of current) is the optimum state to get a linear response on either side of this point to detect small changes in the field in either direction. This is called biasing the MR sensor, and is achieved by placing another thin film of soft magnetic material 304 (typically an alloy of Ni-Fe-Cr, or a laminated layer of CoTaZr and NiFeCr) spaced away from the MR thin film 308, as shown in Fig. 3, with a thin spacer layer 306 in between, such as tantalum, or a laminate of tantalum and another alloy such as NiFeCr. Passage of current through this stack of materials 302 induces a magnetic field and magnetically saturates the soft adjacent layer 304 (as shown by the arrow in Fig. 3), and the free poles at the top and bottom of this soft adjacent layer produce a magnetic "closure" field in the MR layer 308 that causes a vertical magnetization component in the MR thin film 308. In magnetic recording applications, the design is such that the net magnetization of the MR layer 308 is at a 45° angle to the direction of current, as shown by the arrow in Fig. 3.

For magnetoresistive materials, there is another factor that affects the resistance by affecting the magnetization direction of the thin film. This is a combination of the magnetostriction in the material, and the mechanical stress in the material. Magnetostriction is a property that describes the dependence of magnetic properties on the mechanical unidirectional stresses applied to the material (see, e.g., D. Markham and N. Smith, "Magnetoresistive Measurement of Magnetostriction in Permalloy," IEEE Trans. Mag., Vol. 25, No. 5, pp. 4198-4200; R. H. Dee and D. D. King, "Effect of Magnetostriction on Bias Fields in Self-Biased MR Heads," J. Appl. Phys., Vol. 73, No. 10 (1993), pp. 6232-6234). For a material with a finite non-zero magnetostriction coefficient, the mechanical unidirectional stress (or bidirectional stress with a difference in the stress state between the two principal axes) applied to the film affects the intrinsic anisotropy field, and thus the permeability of the material. This in turn causes a change in the slope of the transfer curve. Specifically, the effect of stress on the transfer curve and magnetoresistance of a material with non-zero magnetostriction coefficient is shown in Fig. 4.

The sensitivity of the curves to stress is determined by the magnitude of the magnetostriction coefficient. For a material under a given stress, a small value of magnetostriction coefficient shifts the transfer curve by a small amount, whereas for a material with a large magnetostriction coefficient, the transfer curve is shifted by a large amount. The magnetostriction coefficient of a thin film material can be controlled by composition, thin film deposition conditions, presence and choice of

underlayers, annealing conditions, etc. For magnetic field sensing applications such as magnetic storage, the typical value for the magnetostriction coefficient is in the range of 10^{-7} . However, this value can be made larger depending on the response required from the material.

From Figure 4, it is apparent that the resistance change upon application of stress can be affected by two factors: the degree of stress in the material, and the magnitude of the magnetostriction coefficient. As either or both of these parameters becomes larger, the response from the sensor changes from the neutral state.

In accordance with an aspect of the invention, a MR material such as stack 302 is the basis for a novel stress or pressure sensor. In order to use it in this manner, the underlying base structure for the MR sensor 502 is fabricated as a suspended bridge, a cantilevered beam or a similar kind of membrane that is supported over a cavity formed in a bulk silicon substrate (as shown in Fig. 5). An example of a method of fabricating this is described in more detail below. An MR stack 510 comprising the soft adjacent layer, the spacer layer and the MR layer is deposited on deformable beam 504, and leads 512 are connected thereto to send current I through it and to sense the resulting voltage. It should be apparent that the support structure for MR layer 510 can be a variety of different structures other than the beam 504 of this example, such as a sealed membrane over an enclosure, or any other form that may be suitable for detecting deflection and stress.

Under the application of a force on the beam 504 it deflects. Note that in this configuration of the beam, the stress direction needs to be either unidirectional or, if bidirectional, needs to be different along the two principal axes. If the length of the beam is " l ", the width " b ", and the thickness " t ", for a load per unit length " W ", the maximum stress in the beam is

$$\sigma_{\max} = Mt/2I = (3/4)(W/b)(l^2/t^2) \quad (\text{Equation 2})$$

where M is the moment at the center of the beam and I is the moment of inertia about the vertical axis.

The maximum stress and strain occur on the surface of the beam. Since the MR stack 510 is located on the surface of the beam 504, and is a very thin set of films, for calculation and illustration purposes, one can assume that the MR element is subjected to the maximum stress and strain.

Under these conditions, the magnetostriction of the device causes the resistance of the element to shift from point A to point B (in Fig. 4), and is reflected as a change in the potential drop across the MR sensor. Under increased stress, or with the same stress and an increased magnetostriction coefficient, point B now moves to point C on the chart. The difference in resistance between point A and point B (or point C) results in a potential difference across the sensor from the neutral state. Note that in the unstressed state, the device can be made to operate at any point on the curve; however it is desirable to be closer to the middle of the curve to ensure optimum sensitivity and response to pressure. In this way, by measuring the resistance prior to and after the application of stress, the

difference in resistance gives a good indication of the magnitude of the stress. If the system is calibrated, this can give an idea of the absolute stress as well as just the presence of a pressure point.

In accordance with an aspect of the invention, the sensitivity of the device as described above exceeds the sensitivity of a capacitance based sensor or a piezoresistive sensor. As a result, considerable miniaturization can be realized with MR sensor 502. With conventional fabrication methods, the MR element can be made as small as one to two microns long while maintaining considerable sensitivity (e.g., >1%). From equation 2, this sensitivity varies directly as the square of the length of the beam, and inversely as the width of the beam, and the square of the thickness. As a result, if the thickness is appropriately tailored for the length of the beam, good sensitivity can be obtained even for beam lengths of 1-2 microns and a thickness of 0.2 micron. It is desirable to make the beam as long as possible within the constraints of the product, because sensitivity only improves with the length of the beam. In contrast, a capacitance based sensor or piezoresistance based sensor would require a beam thickness of the order of a few nanometers for a beam length of 2 micron in order to get any valid signal for small values of applied pressure. This would make the beam very weak from a mechanical standpoint, and make it susceptible to fracture.

Preferably, in order to achieve the maximum sensitivity of the sensor to an applied stress, in addition to designing the beam for maximum deflection under a given load, it is appropriate to choose an alloy and deposition conditions that would ensure a maximum $\Delta R/R$ response from the material, as well as a maximum magnetostriction coefficient. Alloys of Nickel – Cobalt (in the range of 70% Nickel and 30% Cobalt) have been found to exhibit such properties, although to people well versed in the art, other alloys may also be used to obtain such a combination of properties. Another advantage of such alloys is that they also exhibit low resistivity, thus reducing power consumption.

Although the above description has been given with reference to using conventional MR materials, it is possible to make a very similar sensor, or even a sensor with a higher sensitivity, using Giant MagnetoResistive (GMR) materials. GMR materials are essentially multilayer thin films similar to MR stacks, except that the resistance change is induced by relative differences in magnetization directions between different thin film layers within the sensor.

A magnetoresistive semiconductor pressure sensor 602 (that can be used for fingerprint verification/identification, for example) employing a MR sensor 502 as described above will now be described in detail with reference to Fig. 6. Several sensors 502 as described above are placed in an array 606 of m rows by n columns on a substrate 604, with a very fine pitch, and connected to electrodes 608 (using techniques such as that described in U.S. Patent No. 4,771,638, for example). Because the sensors can be made as small as 1 - 2 microns in length, the lateral resolution can be as good as 5 microns. For example, when a finger is placed on the array, the ridges on the fingers (which are spaced at about 400 – 500 microns, and are therefore considerably wider than the sensor

pitch in the array), apply a force on the sensors that they come in contact with. The sensors that fall between the ridges experience little to no stress. In this way, one can generate a map of the contact points or the ridges on the fingerprint, and get an accurate reproduction of the fingerprint. However, in practice, the sensor length and pitch can be made greater than 5 microns, since such a good resolution is typically not required for a fingerprint image. Moreover, as the sensor pitch decreases, the processing time for the image increases, since the number of sensors in the image increases as well.

In order to protect the MR sensor during its use as a fingerprint sensor, different schemes may be used. Firstly, for ESD protection, it is relatively simple to coat a layer of insulating material on top of the MR stack, then deposit another layer of a conductive metal (such as Titanium, copper, etc.), whose purpose is to bleed off transient charges caused by ESD. These conductive films need to be grounded, so that the charges from the transient voltage spikes can be bled to ground before they even get to the MR stack layer. This provides another advantage over capacitive techniques, since a conductive layer will affect the capacitance measurement.

Secondly, to protect the MR stack from mechanical abrasion or small impact, a hard coating can be deposited both above and below the conductive ESD protection layer. The thicknesses of all these layers would be in the range of $0.1\mu\text{m} - 5\mu\text{m}$. The material used for the mechanically protective coatings could be a material such as "diamond like carbon" or silicon carbide. These materials can also be tailored to have surface energies such that they are not easily prone to picking up debris or oils from the finger.

An example of electronic circuitry and a method that can be used to probe the array 606 sensors 502 either individually or in groups is shown in Fig. 7. It includes a decoder 702, a multiplexer 704, and amplifier 706, and A/D converter 708. The techniques for providing such electronic circuitry and method according to this example are well known and detailed descriptions thereof are not necessary for an understanding of the present invention (e.g., U.S. Patent No. 4,771, 638).

In accordance with an aspect of a method of fingerprint identification/verification in accordance with the invention, however, to determine whether there is a stress on a particular sensor, a baseline is first established with no finger on the sensor, where the "quiescent" resistance of each element of the array is measured. Then the readings are repeated with the finger on the sensor, and the difference in voltages between the "quiescent, unstressed" state and the "stressed" state is calculated to determine the fingerprint pattern. The method of scanning, providing power to each element, conversion of the values from analog to digital, etc are well known and described elsewhere. Note that the baseline can be established either immediately prior to or immediately following the imaging of the fingerprint.

The advantage of the method of this invention is that it always establishes a reference value, which eliminates the effect of ambient temperature, humidity, stress, etc. The prior art, using thermal,

capacitive or optical means are unable to obtain a reference each time a measurement is taken, because they depend on the presence of a finger to get a reading each time. Even though the resistance of the sensor changes with temperature, this effect can be automatically compensated for by establishing a reference value, either immediately prior to or immediately following the fingerprint
5 imaging.

It should be apparent to those skilled in the art that since the MR sensor's 502 output depends on a number of factors, it can be used in a variety of alternative ways in this embodiment or other embodiments other than for fingerprint identification/verification. For example, it can be used as a temperature sensor (the resistance of the MR sensor changes by about 0.2 – 0.5% per degree Celsius
10 change in temperature); it can be used to sense changes in magnetic fields as described above; it can be used to sense current, etc. Also, since the MR sensor has an excellent frequency response, it can be used for high frequency applications where capacitance is not effective.

An example of a method for manufacturing a magnetoresistive MEMS (MR MEMS) sensor 502 in accordance with the invention will now be described with reference to Fig. 8. As shown in Fig. 8A,
15 a layer of silicon nitride 804 is first deposited on a silicon substrate 802, then a layer of polysilicon 806, followed by another layer of silicon nitride 808. Then the pattern of the beam is etched using photolithography by depositing a layer of photoresist 810 as shown in Fig. 8B, and etching through at least the top two layers of silicon nitride and polysilicon as shown in Fig. 8C. This is followed by preferentially etching out the second layer of polysilicon underneath the silicon nitride in the beam
20 portion 812, thus forming a simply suspended beam 812 of the upper layer of silicon nitride as shown in Fig. 8D.

Alternatively, using similar techniques as are known in the art, a thin silicon beam or membrane is made by starting from a silicon wafer using conventional processing means as have been described elsewhere in the literature. This is typically done either by etching from the back side using
25 anisotropic etchants, or using single sided wafer processing, by first doping the wafer with n-type doping elements (arsenic), covering with a layer of epitaxial silicon, then etching using a chlorine gas plasma to preferentially etch the N+ region. The preferential etching of the N+ region under the top layer of epitaxial silicon leaves the upper layer suspended as a beam, supported on either side (see, e.g., U.S. Patent No. 5,427,975).

It should be noted that even though the manufacturing descriptions above are for the processing of silicon, one can use other materials to achieve the same purpose as well. For example, one could use a substrate of Aluminum, coat it with a layer of insulating alumina (using thin film deposition techniques that are well known), sputter another layer of metal (such as aluminum, titanium, copper, etc.). One can now perform photolithography and use dry etching techniques (such as ion milling) to
35 etch down to the underlying layer of aluminum, and then use etchants that are selective to alumina to

etch out the underlying alumina layer. In this way, a "bridge" structure of aluminum or other metal can be formed as well.

Once the beam is formed, a series of thin films is deposited using thin film techniques (typically a cluster tool), representing the magnetoresistive "stack". This series of materials comprises a
5 Tantalum layer (the underlayer), a layer of Ni-Fe-Cr (which is the soft adjacent layer), another layer of Tantalum, followed by a thin film of Nickel Iron (the MR material). This stack of thin films is deposited on the entire substrate, and therefore will cover the beam, and the exposed portions of the recess under the beam. Only the portions of the stack on top of the beam are the operative portions, hence a photolithographic process is used to either wet etch or dry etch out the portions of the stack
10 that cover the rest of the substrate other than the portion 814 on the beam 812, as shown in Fig. 8E.

Typically, the beam can be made anywhere from 0.2 micron to 20 microns thick; the length of the beam can range from 2 micron to several hundred microns, and the width of the beam can range from 2 micron to several microns. These parameters depend on the mechanical properties of the substrate material used to create the beam, and on the sensitivity required. The beam can be designed
15 to either have "standoff" from the substrate, or can be a free standing structure, with the bottom of the substrate completely etched out.

Although the invention has been described in detail with reference to the preferred embodiments thereof, those skilled in the art will appreciate that various substitutions and modifications can be made to the examples described herein while remaining within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined in
20 the appended claims. For one example, one could extend the use of piezoresistive sensing techniques in combination with microelectromechanical processing methods as described above to manufacture a fingerprint identification or verification device using piezoresistive methods. In order to do this, the "mechanical" beam needs to be made extremely thin and narrow, so that the deflection produced from the beam will still generate enough signal to detect the presence of a ridge on the fingerprint.

What is claimed is:

1. An apparatus capable of sensing pressure comprising:
a support structure; and
a sensor disposed on the support structure, the sensor including:
a ferromagnetic biasing layer;
a nonmagnetic conducting layer disposed on the ferromagnetic biasing layer; and
a magnetoresistive layer, wherein the magnetoresistive layer has non-zero magnetostriction such that the resistance of the magnetoresistive layer will change upon the application of pressure.
2. An apparatus according to claim 1 wherein the support structure is a deformable beam.
3. An apparatus according to claim 2 wherein the deformable beam is formed of semiconductor or insulator layers.
4. An apparatus according to claim 2 wherein the deformable beam is formed of a conductor.
5. An apparatus according to claim 2 wherein the deformable beam has a length of between 2 microns to several hundred microns.
6. An apparatus according to claim 5 wherein the deformable beam has a thickness ranging from 0.1 micron to 20 microns.
7. An apparatus according to claim 6 wherein the width of the beam ranges from 2 microns to several microns.
8. An apparatus according to claim 1 wherein the support structure is a membrane.
9. An apparatus according to claim 1 wherein the support structure is formed within a cavity.
10. An apparatus according to claim 1 wherein the sensor has a length of 1 to several hundred microns.
11. An apparatus according to claim 1 wherein the nonmagnetic conducting layer includes tantalum.

12. An apparatus according to claim 11 wherein the biasing layer includes one of an alloy of Ni-Fe-Cr, and a laminated layer of CoTaZr and NiFeCr.
13. An apparatus according to claim 12 wherein the magnetoresistive layer includes a nickel alloy.
14. An apparatus according to claim 1 wherein the biasing layer includes one of an alloy of Ni-Fe-Cr, and a laminated layer of CoTaZr and NiFeCr.
15. An apparatus according to claim 14 wherein the magnetoresistive layer includes a nickel alloy.
16. An apparatus according to claim 1 wherein the magnetoresistive layer includes a nickel alloy.
17. An apparatus according to claim 1 wherein the thickness of each of the ferromagnetic biasing layer, the nonmagnetic conductive layer and the magnetoresistive layer are within the range of 0.001 μm – 0.5 μm .
18. An apparatus according to claim 1 further including an insulating layer disposed over the magnetoresistive layer and a conductive layer disposed over the insulating layer such that the conductive layer provides for protection from electrostatic discharge.
19. An apparatus according to claim 1 further including an underlayer disposed between the support structure and the ferromagnetic biasing layer.
20. An apparatus according to claim 10 wherein the underlayer comprises one of Tantalum and a composite of tantalum and Ni₄₈Fe₁₂Cr₄₀.
21. An apparatus capable of sensing pressure comprising:
 - a substrate; and
 - a plurality of sensor devices disposed on the substrate in an array, each of the sensor devices including:
 - a support structure; and
 - a sensor disposed on the support structure, the sensor including:
 - a ferromagnetic biasing layer;
 - a nonmagnetic conducting layer disposed on the ferromagnetic biasing layer; and
 - a magnetoresistive layer, wherein the magnetoresistive layer has non-zero

magnetostriction such that the resistance of the magnetoresistive layer will change upon the application of pressure.

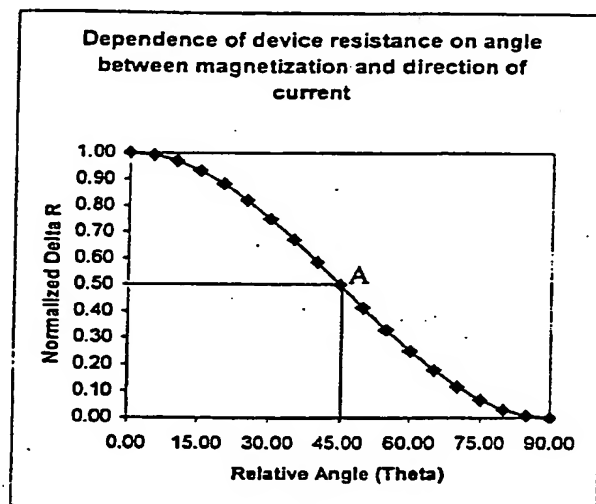
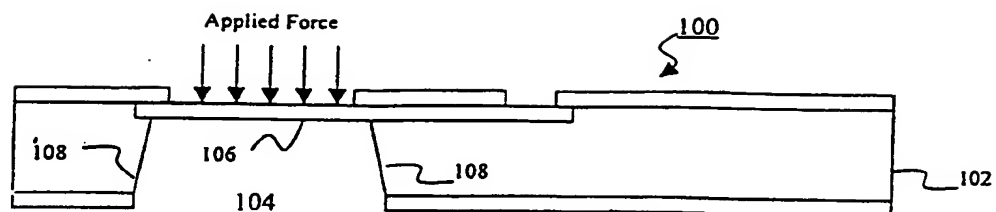
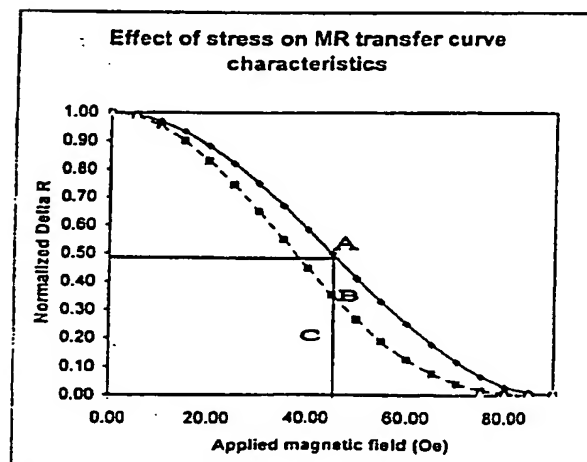
22. An apparatus according to claim 21 wherein each of the support structures is a deformable beam.
23. An apparatus according to claim 22 wherein each of the deformable beams is formed of semiconductor or insulator layers.
24. An apparatus according to claim 22 wherein each of the deformable beams is formed of a conductor.
25. An apparatus according to claim 22 wherein each of the deformable beams has a length of between 2 microns to several hundred microns.
26. An apparatus according to claim 25 wherein each of the deformable beams has a thickness ranging from 0.1 micron to 20 microns.
27. An apparatus according to claim 26 wherein the width of each of the beams ranges from 1 microns to several microns
28. An apparatus according to claim 21 wherein the support structure is a membrane.
29. An apparatus according to claim 21 wherein each of the support structures is formed within a cavity.
30. An apparatus according to claim 21 wherein each sensor has a length of 1 micron to several hundred microns.
31. An apparatus according to claim 21 wherein each of the nonmagnetic conducting layers includes tantalum.
32. An apparatus according to claim 31 wherein each of the biasing layers includes one of an alloy of Ni-Fe-Cr, and a laminated layer of CoTaZr and NiFeCr.
33. An apparatus according to claim 32 wherein each of the magnetoresistive layers includes a nickel alloy.

34. An apparatus according to claim 21 wherein each of the biasing layers includes one of an alloy of Ni-Fe-Cr, and a laminated layer of CoTaZr and NiFeCr.
35. An apparatus according to claim 34 wherein each of the magnetoresistive layers includes a nickel alloy.
36. An apparatus according to claim 21 wherein each of the magnetoresistive layers includes a nickel alloy.
37. An apparatus according to claim 21 wherein the thickness of each ferromagnetic biasing layer, each nonmagnetic conductive layer and each the magnetoresistive layer is within the range of 0.001 micron – 5 micron.
38. An apparatus according to claim 21 further including an insulating layer disposed over each magnetoresistive layer and a conductive layer disposed over each insulating layer such that each conductive layer provides for protection from electrostatic discharge.
39. An apparatus according to claim 21 further including an underlayer disposed between each support structure and the corresponding ferromagnetic biasing layer.
40. An apparatus according to claim 39 wherein the underlayer is one of Tantalum and a composite of tantalum and Ni₄₈Fe₁₂Cr₄₀.
41. A method of sensing pressure in which applied pressure causes a change in the magnetization vector of a magnetoresistive layer within the device and a corresponding change in resistance comprising the steps of:
- providing a sensing device with a sensor including plurality of layers, the plurality of layers comprising a non magnetic conducting layer disposed between a magnetoresistive layer with non-zero magnetostriction and a ferromagnetic biasing layer; and
 - sensing a resistance in the plurality of layers upon application of pressure to the sensing device, the applied pressure causing the magnetization vector of the magnetoresistive layer to change and thereby result in a change in resistance.

42. A method according to claim 41 wherein the sensing device includes a plurality of sensors that are formed and operate as the one sensor such that each sensor detects the pressure of an area associated with that sensor.
43. A method according to claim 41 further comprising the step of sensing an initial resistance of the device when the pressure to be sensed is not applied to the magnetoresistive layer.
44. A method according to claim 43 further comprising the step of determining the pressure applied to the sensing device, the step of determining using both the initial resistance and the sensed resistance in order to minimize the influence of external conditions on the determined pressure.
45. A method according to claim 44 wherein the sensing device includes a plurality of sensors that are each formed and operate as the one sensor such that each sensor detects the pressure of an area associated with that sensor.
46. A method according to claim 45 wherein the method senses pressure applied during the obtaining of a fingerprint and further includes the step of using the resistance sensed by each sensor to determine the fingerprint.
47. An apparatus for sensing pressure comprising:
a substrate;
a sensor formed on the substrate, the sensor including:
a support structure that is smaller than the substrate, thereby providing a cavity above a portion of the substrate; and
a magnetoresistive sensor formed over the support structure.
48. An apparatus according to claim 47 wherein the magnetoresistive sensor is an AMR sensor.
49. An apparatus according to claim 47 wherein the magnetoresistive sensor is a GMR sensor.
50. An apparatus according to claim 47 wherein the support structure is a deformable beam.
51. An apparatus according to claim 50 wherein the deformable beam is formed of semiconductor or insulator layers.

52. An apparatus according to claim 50 wherein the deformable beam is formed of a conductor.
53. An apparatus according to claim 50 wherein the deformable beams has a length of between 2 microns to several hundred microns.
54. An apparatus according to claim 53 wherein the deformable beam has a thickness ranging from 0.1 micron to 20 microns.
55. An apparatus according to claim 54 wherein the width of the beam ranges from 1 microns to several microns
56. An apparatus according to claim 47 wherein a plurality of sensors arranged in an array are formed on the substrate, each of the plurality of sensors including:
 - a support structure that is smaller than the substrate, thereby providing a cavity above a portion of the substrate; and
 - a magnetoresistive sensor formed over the support structure.
57. An apparatus according to claim 56 wherein each magnetoresistive sensor is an AMR sensor.
58. An apparatus according to claim 56 wherein each magnetoresistive sensor is a GMR sensor.
59. An apparatus according to claim 56 wherein each of the support structures is a deformable beam.
60. An apparatus according to claim 59 wherein each magnetoresistive sensor is an AMR sensor.
61. An apparatus according to claim 59 wherein each magnetoresistive sensor is a GMR sensor.

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FIG. 1
(PRIOR ART)**FIG. 2****FIG. 4**

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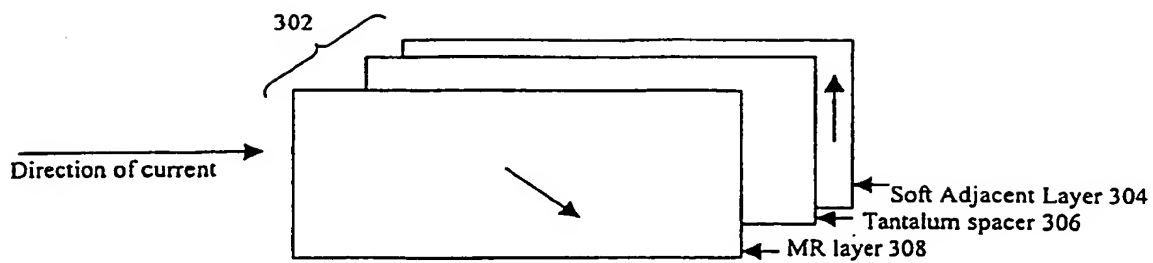


FIG. 3

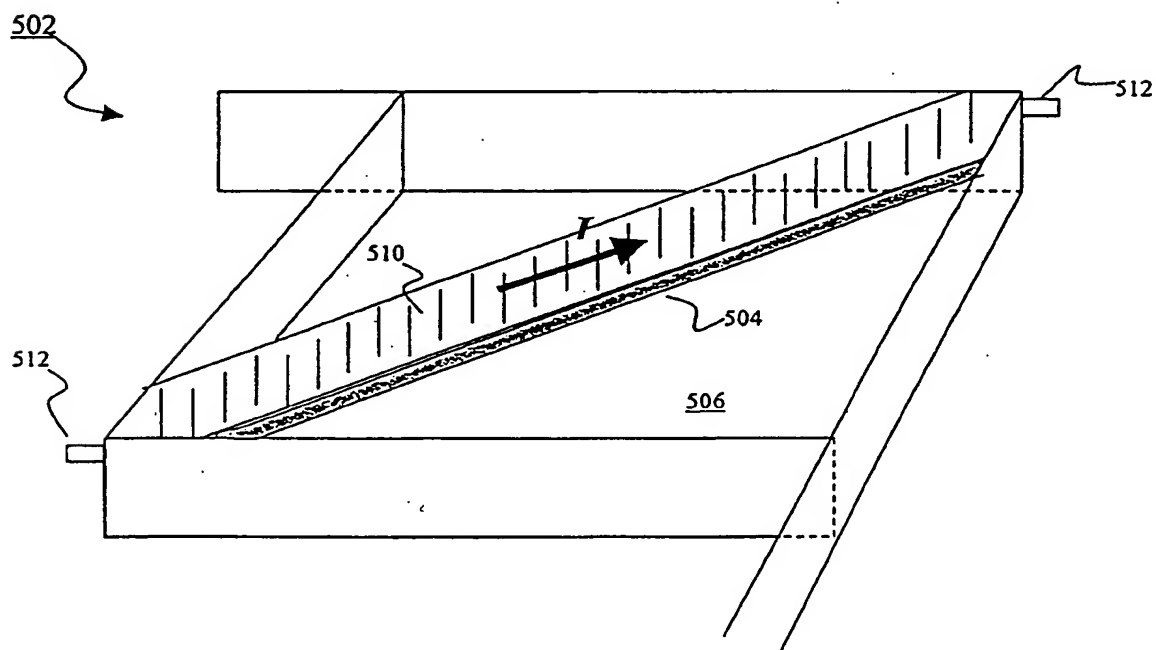


FIG. 5

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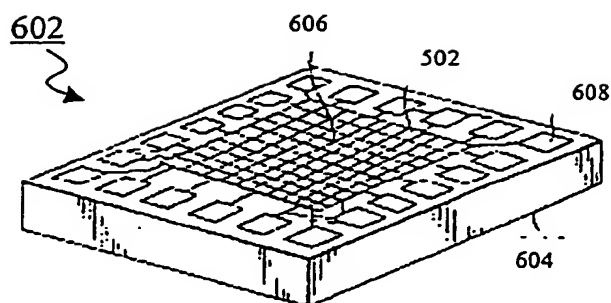


FIG. 6

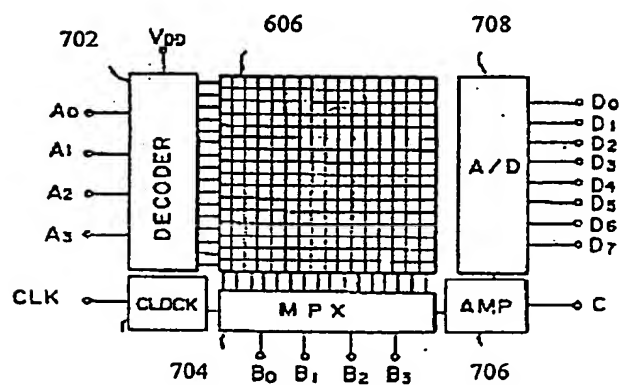


FIG. 7

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FIG. 8A

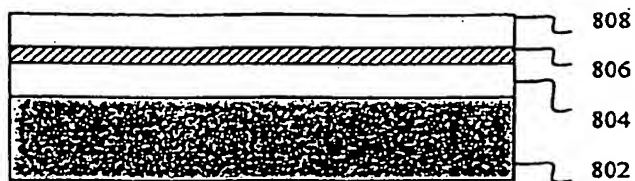


FIG. 8B

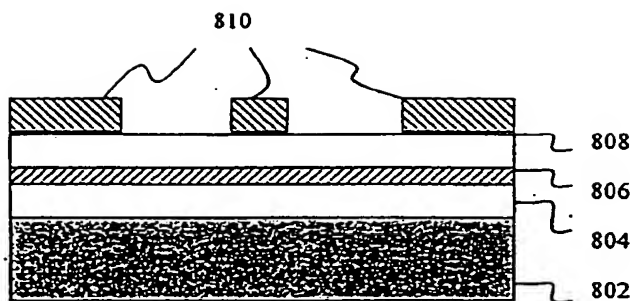


FIG. 8C

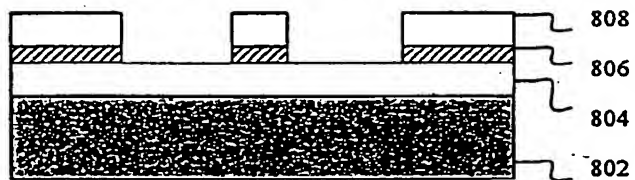


FIG. 8D

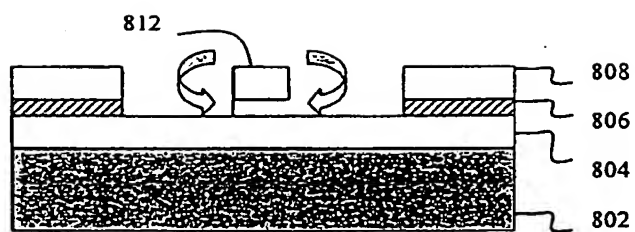
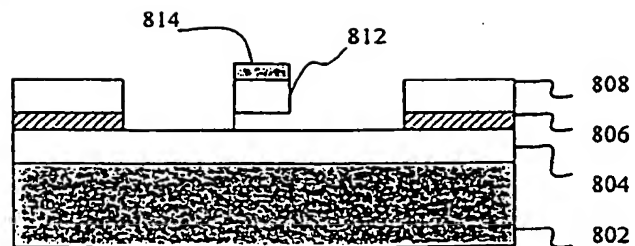


FIG. 8E



INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International Application No.

PCT/US 00/40421

A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER
IPC 7 G01L1/12

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

IPC 7 G01L

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practical, search terms used)

EPO-Internal, PAJ, WPI Data

C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category *	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
X	EP 0 690 296 A (MATSUSHITA ELECTRIC IND CO LTD) 3 January 1996 (1996-01-03)	1-20, 41-44, 47-55
Y	the whole document	21-40, 45, 46, 56-61
Y	EP 0 650 139 A (ENIX CORP) 26 April 1995 (1995-04-26) abstract; figure 1	21-40, 45, 46, 56-61
A	US 5 856 617 A (SPERIOSU VIRGIL SIMON ET AL) 5 January 1999 (1999-01-05) cited in the application	

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Date of the actual completion of the international search

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Date of mailing of the international search report

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European Patent Office, P.B. 5818 Patentlaan 2
NL - 2280 HV Rijswijk
Tel. (+31-70) 340-2040, Tx. 31 651 epo nl,
Fax: (+31-70) 340-3016

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Information on patent family members

Intern. Application No

PCT/US 00/40421

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